

THE PROBLEM OF TWO VASUBANDHUS RECONSIDERED*

«The date of the famous Buddhist philosopher Vasubandhu belongs to the most discussed questions of the history of Indian literature and philosophy», wrote in 1951 Prof. E. Frauwallner in his excellent monograph *On the Date of the Buddhist Master of the Law Vasubandhu*.

Frauwallner's study brought a new critical evaluation of the Sanskrit, Chinese and Tibetan sources collected so far by scholars¹ and set up a new theory of two Vasubandhus, in order to avoid the discrepancy in the dates. As it is known, formerly there were suggested two theories concerning the date of Vasubandhu — according to Péri Vasubandhu lived in the fourth century A.D.², and Takakusu placed Vasubandhu's date in the fifth century A.D.³.

As its starting point Frauwallner's theory of two Vasubandhus takes the divergent traditional chronology which is traced in Paramārtha's life of Vasubandhu and in Hsüan-tsang's records of his

* The present paper is extracted (in a shortened form) from my forth-coming book Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośa* and its Commentaries preserved in the Tanjur, Franz Steiner Verlag, Wiesbaden, 1990.

1. Cf. bibliography in: FRAUWALLNER, *op. cit.*, pp. 67-69; JAINI, *On the Theory of Two Vasubandhus*, BSOAS XXI:1, 1958, pp. 48-53; HIRAKAWA, *Index to the Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, Part I: *Sanskrit-Tibetan-Chinese*, Tokyo 1973, Introduction pp. ii-x.

2. PÉRI, *A propos de la date de Vasubandhu*, BEFEO XI, 1911, pp. 339-390.

3. TAKAKUSU, *The Life of Vasubandhu by Paramārtha* (A.D. 499-569), TP V, 1094, pp. 269-296; *A Study of Paramārtha's Life of Vasubandhu and the Date of Vasubandhu*, JRAS 1905, pp. 33-53; *The Date of Vasubandhu, the Great Buddhist Philosopher*, in *Indian Studies in Honour Ch.R. Lanman*, 1929, pp. 79-88.

travels in India. In the light of the data contained in Paramārtha's account on Vasubandhu, Frauwallner put forward an assumption that «there were two bearers of the name of Vasubandhu, who were confused only at a later time» (On the Date, p. 17), and accordingly suggested the following dates respectively:

a. for Vasubandhu the elder, who was identical with the brother of Asaṅga and was the head of the Yogācāra school, about 320-380 A.D.;

b. for Vasubandhu the younger, who was identical with the author of the *Abhidharmakośa*, about 400-480 A.D.

The authorship of the *Viṃśatikā* and *Triṃśikā*, the works belonging to the Yogācāra school, was however ascribed to Vasubandhu the younger⁴.

Frauwallner's hypothesis did not find a common acceptance among the scholars. It was already La Vallée Poussin who — many years before Frauwallner — warned that it is a desperate hypothesis to identify the brother of Asaṅga converted by him to Mahāyāna with the old Vasubandhu, although one should admit existence and Abhidharmic activity of an elder Vasubandhu⁵. Still yet we do not have a conclusive answer to the problem of Vasubandhu.

A basic source of Frauwallner's theory became Paramārtha's life of Vasubandhu, compiled about the middle of the sixth century A.D. However elsewhere Frauwallner remarked that «the Life of Vasubandhu is no personal work of Paramārtha, but has been pieced together by someone among his disciples on the basis of information hailing from him», and therefore «the confusion of the two Vasubandhus in the Life is not at all to be attributed to Paramārtha, but is due to a mistake by his pupils»⁶.

4. FRAUWALLNER, *Landmarks in the history of Indian logic*, WZKS 5, 1961, p. 132; SCHMITHAUSEN, *Sautrāntika-Voraussetzungen in Viṃśatikā und Triṃśikā*, WZKS 9, 1967, pp. 109-136.

5. LA VALLÉE POUSSIN, *Cosmologie: Le monde des êtres et le monde-réceptacle. Vasubandhu et Yaśomitra - troisième chapitre de l'Abhidharmakośa*, Bruxelles 1914-1919, p. viii n. 2; *L'Abhidharmakośa*, Introduction, p. xxvii.

6. *On the Date*, p. 18; cf. opinion of Demiéville: «une source de médiocre aloi» (*Un fragment sanskrit de l'Abhidharma des Sarvāstivādin*, JA CCXLIX (1961), p. 473 n. 12).

Nevertheless for Frauwallner Paramārtha is the chief witness.

This should be confronted with the fact that actually it was not Paramārtha but Yaśomitra, the author of the *Sphuṭārthā Abhidharmakośavyākhyā*, who expressis verbis testified to the existence of an elder Vasubandhu.

Well, it is true that already La Vallée Poussin, Kimura and other scholars knew this fact; and it is true that Frauwallner also has taken Yaśomitra's testimony into consideration, but only as a supplementary witness: «we have another witness, besides Paramārtha, who distinguishes between Vasubandhu the brother of Asaṅga, and Vasubandhu the author of the *Abhidharmakośa*. It is Yaśomitra...» (*On the Date*, p. 21).

Now, in my opinion one should give the priority to Yaśomitra's testimony. Firstly, it is Yaśomitra who gives the explicit references to the ancient Vasubandhu; secondly, these references are corroborated by two other commentators on the *Abhidharmakośa*, Sthiramati and Pūrṇavardhana; finally, one cannot neglect the fact that Yaśomitra's *Sphuṭārthā* is the single commentary on the Kośa which is preserved both in its Sanskrit original and in the Tibetan translation.

In his monograph Frauwallner expressed his regret that the commentaries on the *Abhidharmakośa* which are preserved in the Tanjur were not available to him, although one could surmise that as in Yaśomitra's *Kośa-vyākhyā* so also in the other commentaries might be found «some useful elements» (*On the Date*, p. 1 note).

Now, in this paper I am going to demonstrate that in the light of the data found in the commentaries on the Kośa by Yaśomitra, Sthiramati and Pūrṇavardhana Frauwallner's theory of two Vasubandhus should be reconsidered. In the following I can only summarize my findings, and some important points require further study.

In Yaśomitra's *Abhidharmakośa-vyākhyā* there are three passages which explicitly refer to the elder Vasubandhu. In the fourth passage the reference is spurious. The fifth passage refers to Asaṅga.

Fragment 1 (ad AK I.13)

The gloss on the *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya* I.13 (*āśrayabhūtarūpaṇād ity apare*) is very important because it is the only instance where all the commentators — Yaśomitra, Sthiramati and Pūrṇavardhana — agree that the word *apare* refers to the *vr̥ddhācārya*-Vasubandhu⁷. Sthiramati and Pūrṇavardhana give a larger quotation ascribed to the old Vasubandhu.

La Vallée Poussin informs that the formula *āśrayabhūtarūpaṇāt* refers to the *Vibhāṣā* (75.14) and also occurs in the *Mahāvvyūtpatti* (No. 2084)⁸.

This could indicate that the old Vasubandhu was a follower of the *Vibhāṣā*. The final answer is however left for a further study.

Fragment 2 (ad AK I.13)

According to Yaśomitra, in the following discussion on the above mentioned formula (Fragm. 1) an adherent of the elder Vasubandhu has been accused of his non-Vaibhāṣika interpretation⁹.

Ultimately it appears that Vasubandhu the *Kośakāra* agrees with the opinion ascribed to the elder Vasubandhu, i.e. that the *avijñapti* is regarded as *rūpa* (matter) because of its «materialization» (*rūpaṇāt*).

À la rigueur one could surmise that here perhaps we have an allusion to the earlier doctrinal opinion of the *Kośakāra* Vasubandhu. (N.B. the Buddhist tradition says that there was an interval between the composition of the *kārikā* and the *bhāṣya* portions of the *Abhidharmakośa*). Such an assumption seems to be invalidated by another reference in Yaśomitra's commentary where a *sthavira*-

7. Yaśomitra (ed. WOGIHARA, 35.20): *āśrayabhūtarūpaṇād ity apara iti vr̥ddhācārya-Vasubandhuḥ* /; *slob dpon Dbyig gñen sha ma (vr̥ddhācārya Vasubandhu)*: Sthiramati, Peking Tanjur No. 5875, TO. 71a1f.; Pūrṇavardhana, Peking Tanjur No. 5594, JU. 42b1.

8. *L'Abhidharmakośa*, I, p. 26 n. 1.

9. Yaśomitra (ed. WOGIHARA, 35.23f.): *vr̥ddhācārya-Vasubandhu-deśīyaḥ kaścīti pariharati* / (...) *tam itarāḥ pratyāha* / *idaṃ tāvad avaihbhāṣikīyam iti* /.

Vasubandhu is mentioned as a preceptor of Manoratha (see Fragm. 3).

Sthiramati and Pūrṇavardhana do not mention the name of Vasubandhu.

Fragment 3 (ad AK III.27)

Yaśomitra in his gloss on the *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya* III.27 where the relation between the *ayoniśo-manasikāra* and *avidyā*, and the position of the latter in the twelve-membered *pratītyasamutpāda* is discussed, ascribes the opinion of the others to the sthavira-Vasubandhu, preceptor of the ācārya-Manoratha.¹⁰ By the way, it is interesting to note an occurrence of this opinion in the *Arthaviniścaya-nibandhana* of Vīryaśrīdatta¹¹.

The opinion ascribed to sthavira Vasubandhu initiated a long polemical discussion against the Sautrāntika master Śrīlāta. Sthiramati quotes also the opinion of Saṅghabhadra in this context. It seems that both the Kośakāra and the sthavira Vasubandhu took as their authority the *Pratītyasamutpāda-sūtra*, whereas Śrīlāta based his arguments on the *Saṁskṛtāpratyayasānidāna-sūtra*, a text known to us only from some scanty fragments quoted by Yaśomitra.

Since the period of Śrīlāta's activity has been put to the period of Saṅghabhadra and Vasubandhu the Kośakāra¹², this is at the same time an indication of presumable floruit of the elder Vasubandhu.

The name of sthavira Vasubandhu is also found in the closing part of Candrakīrti's *Madhyamakāvatāra*, where the sthavira Vasubandhu, Dignāga and Dharmapāla are mentioned as the masters of

10. Yaśomitra (ed. WOGIHARA, 289.6): *ity apara iti / sthaviro Vasubandhur ācārya-Manorathopādhyāya evam āha /*.

11. Cf. *Arthaviniścaya-nibandhana* (ed. SAMTANI, 100.2-5); and *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya* (ed. PRADHAN, 135.7-8).

12. KATO, *Notes sur les deux maîtres bouddhiques Kumāralāta et Śrīlāta, Indianisme et bouddhisme*, in *Mélanges offerts à Mgr Étienne Lamotte*, Louvain-la-Neuve 1980, pp. 197-213.

the treatises¹³. In this context, however, it seems unlikely to connect this sthavira Vasubandhu with the one who was a preceptor of Manoratha.

Also the name of Manoratha appears in Yaśomitra's commentary (ad AK III.59) and in Pūrṇavardhana's *Lakṣaṇānusāriṇī* preceded by the title sthavira¹⁴. In Sthiramati's commentary the titles *ācārya* and *sthavira* are used optionally before the name of Saṅghabhadra, the most often quoted master.

Fragment 4 (ad AK IV.3)

According to Yaśomitra's gloss this is the opinion of sthavira-Vasubandhu¹⁵. The Tibetan translation of his commentary does not confirm the reading of the Sanskrit text and reads sthavira-Vasumitra¹⁶.

Both Sthiramati and Pūrṇavardhana ascribe this opinion to the *ācārya Śrīlāta*¹⁷.

Fragment 5 (ad AK III.15)

The following gloss of Yaśomitra on AK III.15 became for Frauwallner an important argument in his theory of two Vasubandhus.

According to Yaśomitra, Vasubandhu the Kośakāra quotes the opinion of the «teachers of yore» (*pūrvācāryāḥ*), i.e. the Yogācārāḥ — ārya Aśaṅga and others¹⁸.

13. *Madhyamakāvatāra* (ed. LA VALLÉE POUSSIN, 407.14-18).

14. Yaśomitra (ed. WOGIHARA, 326.28): *apara iti / sthavira-Manorathaḥ* /; Pūrṇavardhana, JU. 391b2: *gṛān dag na re ṣes bya ba ni gnas brtan Yid 'oñ ste /* (sthavira Manoratha).

15. Yaśomitra (ed. WOGIHARA, 347.8-11): *avasthānahetvabhāvād bhāvānām vināśa iti sthavira-Vasubandhu-prabhṛtibhir ayaṃ hetur uktaḥ / sa cāyuktaḥ /*.

16. Peking Tanjur No. 5593, CHU. 4a4: *gnas brtan Dbyig bśes (sthavira Vasu-mitra)*.

17. *slob dpon Dpal len* (ācārya Śrīlāta): Sthiramati, THO. 124a7f.; Pūrṇavardhana, NU. 6a7.

18. Yaśomitra (ed. WOGIHARA, 281.20): *pūrvācāryāḥ / yogācārā ārya-Aśaṅga-prabhṛtayaḥ /*.

Sthiramati identifies the «teachers of yore» with the Yogācāras too¹⁹, but for Pūrṇavardhana this is the opinion of the *pūrvasautrāntikāḥ*²⁰.

In his study Frauwallner gave the following interpretation of the passage in question:

«What Vasubandhu means with the expression *pūrvācāryāḥ*, is another question. The opinions of the commentators widely differ in each case. This does not, however, touch our argument, for which the only important thing is that Yaśomitra sees in Asaṅga such an old master» (*On the Date*, p. 21 n. 2).

«Asaṅga — continues Frauwallner, was therefore for him [i.e. for Yaśomitra-M.M.] an old teacher in comparison with the author of the *Abhidharmakośa*. This is expressed even more clearly in a second passage (p. 140.11 [= WOGIHARA ed., M.M.]). Here he characterizes an opinion expressed in the *Abhidharmakośa* as *ācāryamatam*, as opinion of the teacher, i.e. as personal opinion of the author Vasubandhu. Two lines later he cites in support the old teachers and quotes a formulation which derives from Asaṅga» (*On the Date*, p. 21-22).

As to the first opinion of Frauwallner it is to be regretted that he did not give the references to the different opinions of the commentators on the passage in question. A perusal of all the relevant passages in Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya* and in Yaśomitra's *Abhidharmakośa-vyākhyā* indicates that the expressions *pūrvācāryāḥ* and *yogācārāḥ* have been used optionally. Thus the equivalence *pūrvācārya* = *yogācāra* seems to be established here.

Next, Haribhadra (8th century A.D.) in his *Abhisamayālaṅkā-rāloka* says²¹ that his commentary follows the commentary of the *pūrvācārya*-Vasubandhu and others. A few lines later Haribhadra describes the transmission of the *Prajñāpāramitā* texts in the lineage Maitreya-Asaṅga-Vasubandhu. He tells the story of Asaṅga

19. Sthiramati, THO. 32a8: *mal 'byor spyod pa'i sñon gyi slob dpon dag gis bśad do //*.

20. Pūrṇavardhana, JU. 332b6 (= THU. 296b4): *sñon gyi slob dpon dag ces bya ba ni sñon gyi mdo sde pa dag go //*.

21. *Abhisamayālaṅkā-rāloka* (ed. WOGIHARA, 75.8f.; 75.17-22).

who was unable to grasp the high and deep sense of the perfection of wisdom and it was only the bhagavat Maitreya himself who explained to him the *Prajñāpāramitāsūtra* and composed the *Abhisamayālaṃkāra-kārikā-śāstra*. Then the teachings were transmitted by Asaṅga to Vasubandhu and others. (N.B. such succession of the masters was already given by Sthiramati in his *Madhyāntavibhāga-ṭīkā*)²².

According to Frauwallner, Haribhadra «opposes Asaṅga and his brother Vasubandhu as *pūrvācāryāḥ* to the later representants of the school» (*On the Date*, p. 23 n. 1). This argument, however, seems to be a contamination of various passages in support of a presupposed thesis.

What we can say with certainty is the fact that with the expression *pūrvācāryāḥ* are meant the followers of a certain philosophical school or tradition. Asaṅga is called a *pūrvācārya* by Yaśomitra in the sense of a follower of the Yogācāras, whereas Vasubandhu is called a *pūrvācārya* by Haribhadra in the lineage of transmission of the *Prajñāpāramitā* texts.

Now, what regards the second argument of Frauwallner, it can be noticed that the whole Yaśomitra's gloss *pūrvācāryāḥ* = *yogācārā āryasaṅgaprabhṛtayaḥ* (ed. WOGIHARA, 281.27) was tacitly substituted for the word *pūrvācāryāḥ* in another place and in another context in the commentary of Yaśomitra (ed. WOGIHARA, 140.11, 13).

Actually Yaśomitra says in the inquired fragment that in the opinion formulated by Vasubandhu the *Kośakāra* (*ācārya-matam*) he does not find the fault with which Saṅghabhadra has been just reproached. Hence, in order to clear up the terms under discussion, i.e. *vitarka* and *vicāra*, Yaśomitra quotes²³ the definitions of the «teachers of yore», i.e. *pūrvācāryāḥ*. These definitions show a striking resemblance to those which are found in Vasubandhu's *Pañcaskandhaprakaraṇa*, in the *Abhidharmasamuccayabhāṣya* and in the *Triṃśikā-bhāṣya* of Sthiramati²⁴.

22. *Madhyāntavibhāgaśāstra* (ed. PANDEYA, 3f.).

23. Yaśomitra (ed. WOGIHARA, 140.13ff.).

24. *Pañcaskandhaprakaraṇa* (quoted in Yaśomitra, ed. WOGIHARA, 64.25-28), Peking Tanjur No. 5560, SI. 16a3-4; *Abhidharmasamuccayabhāṣya* (ed. TATIA, p. 8-9); *Triṃśikābhāṣya* (ed. LÉVI, 32.19,25,26,27).

Therefore it is evident that Frauwallner's interpretation of Yaśomitra's gloss on the *Abhidharmasamuccayabhāṣya* III.15 does not allow to accept his hypothesis which identifies the brother of Asaṅga with the elder Vasubandhu.

To conclude, in the light of the analysed commentaries on the *Abhidharmakośa* we agree with Frauwallner that actually there lived two Buddhist masters bearing the same name of Vasubandhu; yet we are of an opinion — against Frauwallner and following La Vallée Poussin — that the elder Vasubandhu *cannot* be identified with the brother of Asaṅga.

It is hoped that further investigation will permit us to ascertain with more precision the doctrinal position of the vṛddhācārya-Vasubandhu. There are some grounds to believe that he was an adherent of the *Vibhāṣā* and his period of activity was not far from that of Vasubandhu the *Kośakāra*.